

Challenges and Achievements: There is Much More Our Country Can Do

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As we enter another election year, our airwaves and mailboxes are already flooded with ideas about how to change America. Political campaigns often focus on what's wrong, or at least on what ought to be done better in the opinion of the candidates. That's to be expected. But if we are to truly take stock of the "state of the union," we need to remember our strengths, as well as to acknowledge our challenges for the coming year.

A lot is going right in America. We have passed through a perilous year without a major terrorist attack here at home and have made up for some, but not all, of the neglect of our homeland security. Our magnificent men and women of the military have liberated the Iraqi people from one of the cruelest regimes of modern times, and the world, including the United States, is safer as a result. Our economy is picking up steam with a broad recovery that should be sustainable. Life expectancy is the longest it's ever been, and new medicines and procedures continue to improve our quality of life as well. Our national blessings continue to multiply for those who are willing to see them.

Yet, we do face many challenges in the year ahead, challenges that will not remain idle during a campaign year. Among the issues on Congress' plate this year are:

The War on Terrorism: In fighting this war, we have done a lot in the past year. Many of the enemy are behind bars or are otherwise unable to launch their ruthless attacks. But terrorists continue to plot against us every day. We cannot let up in hunting them down and thwarting their evil schemes. And if we can show progress toward a stable, secure, self-

governing Iraq, we will have struck a major blow against those seeking new recruits for the terrorist training camps.

Homeland Security: At home, the Department of Homeland Security has not yet come together as one, integrated Department, and it still struggles to overcome the bureaucratic, cultural resistance to change. We are just beginning to think about how to measure success in trying to make the country safer and to prevent the unthinkable for happening. We have much work to do.

The Budget: Each year, one of the most important things Congress does is to make decisions on the budget - how much money the federal government will demand in taxes and then how that money will be spent. The combination of a slow economy, the war on terrorism, and a lack of fiscal discipline caused large deficits to reappear. While things are looking better, we will not be able to return to a budget surplus this year. But we ought to at least put the country on the path toward a balanced budget, which requires limiting the growth of spending and, above all, a strong, growing economy.

Implementation of the Medicare Prescription Drug Bill: Last year, Congress and the President approved the most significant change to Medicare in its 38 year history, making available prescription drug coverage. As that bill begins to be implemented, Congress will have to keep a close watch to ensure that the hopes of strengthening Medicare for everyone are achieved.

Highway Bill: Every five years or so, Congress must pass a bill that allocates how the money in the highway trust fund is to be spent. With every gallon of gasoline you buy, you pay 16.4 cents into the federal trust fund, which is then returned to the states to build and repair highways and for other transportation related projects. A major goal for this year is to ensure that Texas gets back at least 90 - 95 cents for every dollar we send in taxes. Today, we get back only about 88 cents for every dollar of fuel taxes paid by Texans.

Immigration: The President has outlined a major proposal to change the status of workers who have entered the country illegally. It will be very controversial in Congress and around the country, and I have real concerns with what has been suggested. But, with illegal immigration continuing to be a problem and with delays of months or even years for those trying to follow the rules and enter the country legally, immigration will be a major issue on the country's agenda for some time.

Energy: The House gave final approval last year to a comprehensive energy bill, which is not all that I would like, but does take real positive steps toward more energy security for the country. Hopefully, the Senate will break the log-jam that has prevented a final vote on the measure

Judges: There have been several controversial court decisions over the past year, dealing with everything from the Pledge of Allegiance to the definition of "marriage." Constitutional amendments have been proposed to reverse some of these decisions, and frustration with delays in getting a Senate vote on a number of the President's judicial nominees will make judges a key issue for the year.

We are fortunate to live in a great country, which can always be made better. Hopefully, even in a political year, Congress and the Administration will find ways to make progress on some of the major challenges facing us, thinking not only of next November, but of the next generation, as well.

